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Access for children in need to the key services covered by the European Child Guarantee

Czechia

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Summary

On 14 June 2021, the Council of the European Union (EU) adopted a Recommendation establishing a “European Child Guarantee”, with a view to guaranteeing access to six key services for “children in need”:

- effective and free access to four services: high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC); education and school-based activities; at least one healthy meal each school day; and healthcare; and
- effective access to two services: healthy nutrition and adequate housing.

The purpose of the present report is to assess the extent to which low-income children in Czechia do indeed have effective (or effective and free) access to these services.

In Czechia, children over 3 have a legal right to a place in a public kindergarten. Only children over 5 (when compulsory schooling starts) have free access to ECEC. Insufficient support for public ECEC creates significant financial and non-financial barriers. The high cost of childcare in children’s groups and commercial facilities implies financial barriers for low-income children. A persistent shortage of places in public kindergartens represents a key non-financial barrier to access that is critical for all children under 3, especially for low-income children.

Although all children have free access to public primary and secondary schools, there are hidden costs which disproportionately affect low-income children. Children living in households receiving the minimum income scheme (MIS) benefits may receive discretionary extraordinary assistance within the MIS to cover the above-mentioned costs.

There is no statutory requirement for schools to provide effective and free access to at least one healthy meal each school day. However, there are some projects that support access to free school meals for a small proportion of low-income children, including an even smaller proportion of AROPE children.

Czech legislation ensures equal access to healthcare. However, there are some out-of-pocket payments. To reduce the financial barrier to access for the general population, a limit is set on the total expenditure on prescribed medicines and food supplements in a given calendar year (see Section 4.2). Czechia was among the countries with the lowest proportion of people who reported unmet needs for health-related services due to financial reasons in 2021. Non-financial barriers include regional disparities in the capacity of health services, leading to the inaccessibility of care in some medical specialties, including paediatrics.

Some recent studies suggest that households often mention financial factors among the causes of children’s inappropriate diets. In addition to the projects supporting lunches at schools, there are two publicly funded measures that indirectly support access to healthy meals for children. These include EU funding for homeless people/households and other people in serious social need, and support for non-governmental food banks.

Czechia provides two means-tested housing benefits for low-income households, but there are no specific measures to improve support for families with children. There is considerable non-take-up. No studies explicitly address non-financial barriers to housing. While some municipalities that possess housing stock of their own give families with children priority points in housing allocations, some studies suggest that certain municipal housing rules may disadvantage low-income households with children. As a result, some low-income families may live in sub-standard housing (hostels). Families of Roma origin may face barriers to accessing municipal social housing.

Introduction

On 14 June 2021, the EU Member States unanimously adopted the Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 establishing a “European Child Guarantee” (ECG).¹

The objective of the ECG is to offset the impact of poverty on children and to prevent and combat their social exclusion. To this end, Member States are recommended to guarantee for “children in need” (defined as people **under 18** who are at risk of poverty or social exclusion – AROPE):

- effective and free access to four services: high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC); education and school-based activities;² at least one healthy meal each school day; and healthcare; and
- effective access to two services: healthy nutrition and adequate housing.

According to the ECG Recommendation, **effective access** means “*a situation in which services are readily available, affordable, accessible, of good quality, provided in a timely manner, and where the potential users are aware of their existence, as well as of entitlements to use them*” (Article 3d). **Effective and free access** means “effective access” to the services, as well as free-of-charge provision – either by organising and supplying such services or by providing “*adequate benefits to cover the costs or the charges of the services, or in such a way that financial circumstances will not pose an obstacle to equal access*” (Article 3e).

The Recommendation directs the Member States to prepare action plans, covering the period until 2030, to explain how they will implement the Recommendation.³ These plans are to be submitted to the European Commission.

The purpose of the present report is to assess the extent to which children who are AROPE have effective and free access to four of the six services covered by the ECG and effective access to the other two (see above). Given that the eligibility criterion (or criteria) for accessing those services in individual Member States (at national and/or sub-national level, depending on how the service is organised) is/are not based on the EU definition of the risk of poverty or social exclusion,⁴ the report focuses on access for **low-income children** to each of these services, using the national low-income criterion (or criteria) that apply (e.g. having a household income below a certain threshold or receiving the minimum income). Throughout this report, “low-income children” is to be understood as children living in low-income households.

In Czechia, all six services covered by the ECG are primarily regulated at national level. Therefore, the report seeks to provide a general picture of the (effective/free) access for low-income children in the country.

¹ The full text of the ECG Recommendation is available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.L_.2021.223.01.0014.01.ENG&toc=OJ%3AL%3A2021%3A223%3ATOC.

² According to the Recommendation (Article 3f), “school-based activities” means “*learning by means of sport, leisure or cultural activities that take place within or outside of regular school hours or are organised by the school community*”.

³ Once they have been submitted to the European Commission, the plans are made publicly available online at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1428&langId=en>.

⁴ According to the EU definition, children are AROPE if they live in a household that is at risk of poverty (below 60% of median income; hereafter AROP) and/or severely materially and socially deprived, and/or (quasi-)jobless. For the detailed definition of this indicator and all other EU social indicators agreed to date, see: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=756&langId=en>. In 2021, EU Member States agreed a target to be reached by 2030: a reduction in the number of people AROPE in the EU by at least 15 million, including at least **5 million children**.

The report is structured by service:

- effective and free access to high-quality ECEC;
- effective and free access to education and school-based activities;
- effective and free access to at least one healthy meal each school day;
- effective and free access to healthcare (e.g. free regular health examinations and follow-up treatment, and access to medicines, treatments and support);
- effective access to healthy nutrition;⁵ and
- effective access to adequate housing.⁶

1. Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

This section describes the situation regarding effective and free access for low-income children to ECEC services.

1.1 Mapping accessibility and affordability of ECEC

Table 1.1: Accessibility and affordability of ECEC

Childcare (usually under age 3)		Pre-school setting (usually age 3 to compulsory school age)	
Accessibility	Affordability	Accessibility	Affordability
NO	NO	ENT-ALL3 years	FREE-ALL5years

Note: "ENT-ALL3years" means a legal entitlement for all children from the age of 3. "FREE-ALL5years" means free for all children from the age of 5. "NO" in the affordability column means not free for low-income households. If the information differs between centre-based and home-based care, the information provided applies to centre-based care.

According to legislation, children over 3 have a legal right to a place in a public kindergarten. However, the accessibility of ECEC is insufficient due to a lack of facilities (for details see Section 1.2.2). From age 5, enrolment in a kindergarten is compulsory and free of charge. Parents only pay for meals. There is no limit on the number of hours per day or week, or any other restriction: see Table 1.1.

In the whole country, directors of kindergartens have the authority to waive the fee in cases where the parents or legal representatives of a child receive: a repeated MIS benefit; care allowance (a benefit for people with disabilities) corresponding to a higher degree of dependency; or a foster care benefit. No information is available on how widely this option is used.

Low-income children are defined as recipients of social assistance or MIS benefits. Examples of income thresholds are provided in Section 2.3.1. Children under 3 have neither a guarantee of access nor free access to ECEC.

⁵ According to the Recommendation (Article 3g), "healthy meal" or "healthy nutrition" means "a balanced meal consumption, which provides children with nutrients necessary for their physical and mental development and for physical activity that complies with their physiological needs".

⁶ According to the Recommendation (Article 3h), "adequate housing" means "a dwelling that meets the current national technical standards, is in a reasonable state of repair, provides a reasonable degree of thermal comfort, and is available and accessible at an affordable cost".

1.1.1 Conditions for qualifying as a “low-income child”

Not applicable.

1.1.2 Relation between the group(s) of children who have free access and the AROPE population of children in the relevant age group(s)

In Czechia, 130,388 children aged from 5 to compulsory school age (i.e. the category provided with free access) are enrolled in kindergartens. Data on AROPE children in this category are not available.

1.2 Main barriers to effective and free access to ECEC for low-income children

1.2.1 Financial barriers

Financial costs are a barrier to effective and free access to ECEC for children from low-income households. The high costs of childcare, combined with the low incomes of AROPE households, imply low affordability of ECEC.

A recent report showed that the enrolment rate of children aged 0-2 in childcare facilities in Czechia was among the lowest in Europe. Affordability for AROPE children is worse than for other children. In total, only 6.5% of children aged 0-2 and 4.5% of AROPE children were enrolled in childcare facilities in Czechia in 2021, while in the EU-27 it was 38.6% and 27.3%, respectively. For children aged between 3 and compulsory school age, the difference was significant: the enrolment rate for all children was 82.5% but only 63.3% for children AROPE in 2021. The difference was 19 percentage points (pp), while in the EU-27 the difference was much smaller: 89.8% against 83.8% (6pp) (EC 2022).

The cost of ECEC differs depending on the type of ECEC facility. The fee in kindergartens is typically CZK 500-600/€20-24 per month,⁷ but in some cases it is higher: for example, in the capital city of Prague it may be as high as CZK 1,200/€48 per month in some facilities. The cost of meals is typically CZK 800-1,200/€32-48 per month, with slight variations depending on the age of the child and whether the child stays in the kindergarten for a full day or half a day.⁸

The fee in children's groups⁹ is significantly higher. A 2019 survey (MLSA 2019) reported that the average fee was CZK 3,895/€156 monthly. When respondents in this survey (a representative sample of the adult population) were asked about an affordable level of fees for child-minding services, only 17% said that it could be higher than CZK 3,500/€140, 54% stated it should be between CZK 2,000/€80 and CZK 3,500/€140, and 37% said it should be less than CZK 2,000/€80 (29% responded “do not know”).

⁷ We are using the exchange rate CZK 25:€1: this is the value around which the exchange rate has oscillated for the last five years, and which we therefore use for reasons of practicality in presenting the results. We also note that the Ministry of Finance used 24.54:1 as the average exchange rate for 2022, which is less than a 2% difference from the 25:1 exchange rate we use.

⁸ Information based on our own investigation of the websites of public kindergartens in various municipalities.

⁹ The Act on Children's Groups was approved by parliament in November 2014. Under this act and its amendments, any legal subject can provide childcare in groups of up to 24 children (of at least 6 months of age until the start of compulsory schooling). Children under age 1 can only be cared for in a group of no more than four children under 4. The act allows for attendance of at least six hours per day, which is provided outside the child's home in a group of children and is aimed at meeting the child's needs, their education and the development of their skills and cultural, hygienic and social habits ([Dětské skupiny \(mpsv.cz\)](https://www.mpsv.cz)).

Another survey of providers of these services conducted by Zamykalová and Vojtíšková (2020) reported an average fee of CZK 3,514/€141, where 2% of facilities requested no fee, 28% requested a fee of less than CZK 2,000/€80, 43% requested a fee between CZK 2,000/€80 and CZK 5,000/€200, 23% requested a fee between CZK 5,000/€200 and CZK 10,000/€400, and 2% requested a fee of more than CZK 10,000/€400.¹⁰ This means that, in many cases, the required fee was higher in 2020 than the ceiling set in legislation in 2021.¹¹

Fees in private kindergartens are even higher: they usually range between CZK 4,000/€160 and CZK 10,000/€400. The fee depends very much on the region and municipality. In the countryside and in remote regions, fees sometimes drop to CZK 2,000/€80 and CZK 3,000/€120. In Prague, on the other hand, they go up to CZK 16,000/€640. The cost of meals usually comes close to CZK 2,000/€80 per month. In Prague, it is often even more, close to CZK 3,000/€120.¹²

OECD calculations for 2021 showed that, in Czechia, a family of two adults with two children aged 2-3 attending a public facility spent 29% of their net income on childcare costs if the first parent earned 67% of the average wage and the second earned the minimum wage; and the percentage was the same if both parents earned 67% of the average income – whereas the OECD average was 9% and 10% respectively. In the case of a single parent on 67% of the average wage or minimum wage it was 29% and 32% respectively, while the OECD average was 5% in both cases.¹³ An important arrangement in this respect is that public kindergarten directors have discretion to reduce or waive altogether the enrolment fees in the case of low-income households, mainly those who are social assistance recipients. The category of social assistance recipients largely overlaps with the category of the unemployed, although unemployment as such does not provide grounds for such relief.¹⁴ However, no evidence is available on how this discretion is used.

The affordability of ECEC affects Roma households in particular. Data by the Ministry of Youth, Education and Sports (MEYS) show that while the proportion of Roma children in the first grade of primary school (where no enrolment fee is required) was 3.5% in 2021, their proportion in kindergartens was lower, 1.94% (Government Office 2021). However, the proportion of Roma children over 5 (which was 58.5% of all Roma children in kindergartens) in kindergartens was 3.3%, which was almost equal to their proportion in the first grade. Thus, the number of Roma children enrolled was 7,046, of whom 4,126 children were over 5. This finding that the enrolment of Roma children over age 5 was nearly identical with their enrolment in primary schools is a positive finding, probably attributable to the fact that enrolment in kindergarten in the last year preceding primary school is free of charge. On the other hand, the report mentions that some Roma children did not participate in compulsory pre-school education, primarily children from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds living in socially excluded localities. It is precisely these children that would benefit most from pre-school education with regard to preparation for compulsory schooling (Government Office 2021).

Since 2014, one parent in a family has been able claim a tax deduction for placing a child in ECEC. Its yearly value per child corresponds to the actual provable cost of the ECEC, up to the annual limit at the level of the monthly minimal wage (CZK 11,000/€440 in 2017,

¹⁰ The maximum fee was set at CZK 4,000/€160 in 2021 in legislation.

¹¹ An overview of current fees is not available.

¹² Our own investigation of the websites of private kindergartens. There is no central register.

¹³ [Net childcare costs for parents using childcare facilities \(oecd.org\)](https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=NCC), OECD tax-benefit model on net childcare costs: <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=NCC>.

¹⁴ We need to take into consideration that a great majority of children attend public kindergartens, where childcare costs are low and affordable compared with children's groups or commercial kindergartens.

CZK 16,200/€648 in 2022). This means that in 2022 the upper limit of this tax deduction was CZK 1,350/€54 per month.

This amount can cover enrolment fees for public facilities. It does not cover children's group fees if they are above CZK 1,350/€54 per month, which mostly is the case. We have documented that average fees climb to almost CZK 4,000/€160 a month, not to mention fees in private kindergartens.

1.2.2 Non-financial barriers

The key non-financial barrier to access to ECEC for all children, including low-income children, is the lack of capacity in public ECEC. This is to a great extent due to insufficient support for ECEC. The MEYS is responsible for running ECEC (kindergartens) for children from age 3 (age 2 under certain conditions) until school age, while municipalities establish kindergartens and guarantee their operating costs. Kindergartens may also be established and operated by other entities. In the 2021/2022 school year, there were 4,782 kindergartens established by municipalities, 425 by private entities, 84 by regional governments, 50 by churches, and 7 by the MEYS (MEYS 2022).

Traditionally, nurseries were subordinate to the Ministry of Health. They provided care for children 0-2 (under 3). Under the Act on Health Services from 2012, nurseries ceased to be classified as health service institutions in April 2012. Since April 2013, it has been possible to run a nursery only on the basis of a professional trade licence, but no ministry has been made responsible for establishing and supporting nurseries.

Since 2014, the government has been supporting the development of children's groups, with support from the European Social Fund (ESF) (see the previous section). As a result, municipalities have been able to establish facilities for children under 3 based on the Act on Children's Groups. The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MLSA/MPSV) has been made responsible for the agenda of children's groups (i.e. regulations, organising calls and providing support/ funding). In October 2021, an amendment to the Act No 247/2014 Coll. came into force. The major change it brought was the introduction of stable funding from the state budget from January 2022.¹⁵ This measure has somewhat improved the accessibility of ECEC compared with previous years (see below). In consequence, the capacity of children's groups increased (see below) but was not sufficient to meet the increased demand for ECEC.

The Education Act from 2016 introduced important changes: an obligatory year of pre-school education (with free access) was implemented starting from the 2017/2018 school year; next, children were given the right to a place in kindergarten – to children aged 4 from the 2017/2018 school year, children aged 3 from the 2018/2019 school year, and children aged 2 from the 2020/2021 school year (MEYS 2015). In 2018, Civic Democratic deputies proposed cancelling the guarantee of a place in kindergarten for children at age 2. The proposal was passed by parliament and approved by the senate in July 2018, within the framework of an amendment to the Education Act.¹⁶

EU-SILC¹⁷ data provided by Eurostat¹⁸ show that the participation rate of children in formal ECEC in Czechia was among the lowest in the EU-27 in 2021, and well below the EU-27 average. Participation rates for children aged 0-2 were consistently low in 2021: 95.1% of children did not participate, 4.5% of children participated for less than 30 hours per week, and

¹⁵ The amount of the contribution per child corresponds to the contribution for a public kindergarten; the contribution for children under 3 is 1.7 times as high.

¹⁶ <http://www.msmt.cz/reforma-financovani-bude-spustena-od-r-2020-schvalil-senat?source=rss>

¹⁷ European Union statistics on income and living conditions.

¹⁸ EU SILC Table [ILC_CAINDFORMAL__custom_4567542], downloaded on 17 January 2023.

only 0.8% of children participated for 30 or more hours per week. The corresponding average figures for the EU-27 were 63.8%, 15.1% and 21.1%, respectively, which is a striking difference. In 2020, 95.2% of children aged 0-2 did not participate in ECEC, only 2.3% of children participated for less than 30 hours per week, and 2.5% participated for 30 or more hours per week, which was more than in 2021.

Most notable, however, is the decreasing participation rate of children aged from 3 to compulsory school age: 37.4% of children did not participate, 26.6% of children participated for less than 30 hours per week, and only 36.0% of children participated for 30 or more hours per week in 2021. In 2020, only 21.8% of children did not participate, 28.6% participated for less than 30 hours per week, and 49.6% participated for 30 or more hours per week. The corresponding average figures in 2021 for the EU-27 were 16.1%, 31.8% and 51.6%.¹⁹

The impact of insufficient ECEC capacity is documented by the following: in the 2021/2022 school year, a total of 105,534 new children enrolled in kindergartens and 44,271 children were rejected.²⁰ As regards children from age 5 to compulsory school age, 12,669 of these children enrolled and only 1,211 were rejected (less than 10% of those enrolled). However, when looking at children under 3, 25,376 enrolled and 25,209 were rejected – which are almost identical figures and a very high rejection rate.²¹

The development of the overall capacity of kindergartens and children's groups can be summarised as follows: the total number of children in kindergartens dropped slightly from 362,653 to 360,490 between the 2016/2017 and 2020/2021 school years. The number of enrolled children slightly increased from 123,010 to 125,068, while the number of rejected children increased from 31,991 to 46,098 (MEYS 2022).

Over the period of seven years from 2016 to 2022, CZK 7 billion/€280 million was invested in children's groups from the ESF and the state budget under the Implementation of Children's Groups project (MLSA 2022a). Significant support for children's groups has increased their capacity. In January 2023, there were 1,481 children's groups with 19,957 places.²² MLSA (2019) data show that 18% of children were aged under 2, 41% were aged 2-3, 28% were aged 3-4 and only 13% were over 4. Thus, children's groups provided an estimated 12,000 places for children under 3 in addition to the capacity of kindergartens.

On the other hand, the capacity of kindergartens dedicated to children under 3 dropped by about 12,000 places during the period 2016/2017 to 2021/2022 amid increasing demand (see data above on the increasing numbers of rejected children, in particular the data on 25,000 rejected children under 3). This is not an effect of demographic trends, because in spite of the additional 20,000 places in children's groups the total number of applications for kindergartens increased from 154,000 to 171,000 between 2016/2017 and 2021/2022. It can also be noted that between 2013 and 2017 the number of births increased from 106,751 to 114,405, an increase of approximately 2,000 children per year.²³ The limited accessibility of childcare for children under 3 is becoming even more pressing. A total of only 32,712 children under 3 enrolled in kindergarten in the 2021/2022 school year, compared with 44,726 in 2016/2017.

Whereas in 2016/2017 123,000 applications were successful and 32,000 were rejected, in 2020/2021 the number of rejected applications increased to 39,000 compared with 117,000 successful applications, and in 2021/2022 it increased again to 46,000 compared with 125,000

¹⁹ Eurostat, EU SILC Table [ILC_CAINDFORMAL__custom_4567542], downloaded on 17 January 2023.

²⁰ In addition, there were about 20,000 cases where the administrative procedure was terminated or not concluded.

²¹ Our own computations based on statistical data by MEYS (2022).

²² [e-EDS \(meps.cz\)](https://meps.cz)

²³ Data from the Czech Statistical Office, [Narozeni.xlsx \(live.com\)](https://www.czso.cz).

successful applications. This indicates that the development of the overall public ECEC capacity did not react to the increasing demand for childcare.²⁴

Zykarová and Janhubová (2020) estimated that at the end of 2018 there was a need, on the part of parents, to place 71,000 children age 0-3 in formal childcare. Kindergartens were able to cover 35,000 children, and children's groups 11,000; 3,375 were placed in trade licenced services and 500 in mini-nurseries. This means that some estimated 20,000 places were lacking. This number has probably increased even further since 2020 considering the rising numbers of rejected applications for kindergartens (see above).

Considering that about 60% of children in children's groups (about 12,000 children in 2023), are under 3, this additional capacity of children's groups seems to have roughly offset the declining number of places for children under 3 in kindergartens. Thus, the measure of children's groups did not bring a solution to the longstanding problem of insufficient access to ECEC. Between 2016/2017 and 2021/2022, a large proportion of children under 2 were pushed into children's groups while existing places were reserved for older children. Table A.1 in Annex illustrates that in only three regions out of 14 did the overall capacity for children under 3 (in kindergartens and children's groups) seem to increase over this period, despite the loss of places for children under 3 in kindergartens.

Our findings are consistent with Zykarová and Janhubová (2022, p.12), who reported a decline in the number of children under 3 in kindergartens between 2018 and 2020, from approximately 35,000 to 24,000. At the same time, the number of children in the country aged 2-6 increased from 558,000 to 570,000.

The paradox of the decreasing numbers of children aged 0-2 enrolled in kindergartens in the context of the increasing demand for ECEC and the capacity provided in children's groups documents, in our opinion, insufficient co-ordination of the efforts of the MLSA and the MEYS to meet this demand for ECEC. If the number of children aged 0-2 enrolled in kindergartens had remained stable (rather than fallen) over the period 2016/2017-2021/2022, the number of rejected children in this age group would not have increased, owing to the additional capacity in children's groups (see Table A.1 in Annex).

There are huge regional disparities in the accessibility of childcare for children under 3, both in relation to kindergartens and children's groups. Kindergartens are least accessible in big cities and their surroundings, such as Prague, Brno, Liberec, Beroun, Brno-Country district and Kutná Hora, where kindergartens cover less than 50% of the capacity needed (Zykarová and Jakubková 2020). Kalíšková *et al.* (2016, p. 4) argued: "*The present-day division of powers and responsibilities between central government and local authorities makes effective coordination difficult. The shortage of places in childcare facilities is further complicated by a lack of accurate information about the gap between supply and demand at a local level, and by the fact that local authorities are unable to reliably predict future fluctuation in demand. Changes to the regulatory processes in these areas would be desirable.*"

The Czech action plan for implementing the ECG from September 2022 pays attention to the problem of the lack of affordable childcare for children under 3, and states (p. 88) that the number of facilities should increase by 40% due to new investment. The plan is not specific enough to assess how this objective would be achieved (MLSA 2022b).

²⁴ [Statistická ročenka školství - 2021/2022 - výkonové ukazatele \(msmt.cz\)](#) [Statistical Yearbook of Education 2021/2022 – performance indicators].

1.3 Free meals provision for low-income children in ECEC

There is no guarantee or systematic measure in place to provide free healthy meals for low-income children in Czechia. The main measure is the *Lunches to Schools* project, funded by the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) (see Section 3 for details). In the 2021/2022 school year, nearly 15,000 children from low-income households aged 3-15 benefited from the project. It is estimated that a large majority of these children were primary school pupils; there are no data available on the number of children who benefited from the project in kindergartens. However, it is indicative that children under 3 are not eligible, although about 25,000 of them attend kindergarten. Another initiative is the *Support for School Meals* grant programme, funded by the MEYS and available to NGOs supporting primary school pupils in need. (See Section 3 for more details.)

2. Education and school-based activities

This section describes the situation regarding effective and free access for low-income children to education and school-based activities.

Section 2.1 maps the main school costs in public primary and secondary education, distinguishing between the following:²⁵

- compulsory basic school materials (schoolbag, pens, glue, scissors, etc.);
- compulsory school materials (textbooks, school supplies, notebooks, etc.);
- compulsory specific clothing (uniform, sports clothing);
- IT equipment requested by the school;
- sports equipment or musical instruments requested by the school;
- compulsory extramural activities (e.g. school trips, sport, culture) that are part of the curriculum;
- other compulsory fees or costs; and
- transport costs to or from school.

Section 2.2 briefly describes the cash benefits specifically intended to help meet educational costs.

Finally, Section 2.3 seeks to identify the main barriers that prevent low-income children from having effective and free access to school-based activities as defined in the Council Recommendation establishing the ECG (see "Introduction" section). Given that the distinction between these activities and some of the activities covered above – especially the “compulsory extramural activities (e.g. school trips, sport, culture) that are part of the curriculum” – may not always be clear-cut, the focus of Section 2.3 is specifically on school-based activities that are not part of the curriculum.

²⁵ Tuition fees charged by private schools are not covered.

2.1 Mapping the main school costs in public primary and secondary education

Table 2.1a: School costs of primary education (free for all/low-income children)

Basic material	Books	Clothing	IT	Sports or music equipment	Extra-mural activities	Other fees or costs	Transport
NO	NO	NO	NA	NA	NO	NA	NO

Note: "NO" means that most/all items in the category are not free for low-income children. "NA" (not applicable) means that this category is not requested/compulsory in the country.

Table 2.1b: School costs of secondary education (free for all/low-income children)

Basic material	Books	Clothing	IT	Sports or music equipment	Extra-mural activities	Other fees or costs	Transport
NO	NO	NO	NO	NA	NO	NO	NO

Note: "NO" means that most/all items in the category are not free for low-income children. "NA" (not applicable) means that this category is not requested/compulsory in the country.

Although all children have free access to public primary and secondary schools in Czechia, schooling is not free of costs. Schools do not require parents to pay for music or sports equipment (primary and secondary education), or for information technologies (primary education), since these items are not a compulsory/standard component of the educational programme; see Table 2.1a and Table 2.1b. Also, there are no enrolment fees or exam admission fees for public primary and secondary schools in Czechia. No other item of school-based costs is free of charge; see Table 2.1a and Table 2.1b. This represents an obvious burden for families, and low-income families in particular (see below).

On their own initiative, many schools organise help for pupils, especially pupils from low-income families, to reduce these costs. Some assistance is provided in the form of redistribution of some used textbooks (from the third grade of primary school onwards). In both primary and secondary schools, parents contribute to funds that are used to pay for extra-mural activities, and the parents' association may agree, in co-operation with the school, to help pupils from low-income families, for example to pay for the rent of sports equipment, etc. These cases are usually considered on an individual basis. In secondary education, where IT equipment may be required, schools allow pupils access to IT at school when there is no other option for them.

2.1.1 Conditions for qualifying as a "low-income child"

Not applicable.

2.1.2 Relation between the group(s) of children who have free access and the AROPE population of children in the relevant age group(s)

Although all children have free access to public primary and secondary schools there are school-related costs which disproportionately affect low-income children.

2.2 Cash benefits whose specific purpose is to help meet educational costs

There are no specific cash benefits designed to help children – either all or only low-income children, or any other group of children – to meet educational costs.

In principle, the only direct support towards school-related costs can be provided under the minimum income scheme (MIS).²⁶ According to the Act on Material Need No 111/2006 Coll., a discretionary, extraordinary immediate assistance (lump-sum) benefit may be provided under the MIS to cover reasonable costs incurred in connection with children's school-based activities. The low-income criterion is described in Section 2.3.1. In addition to the low-income criterion, an effort to meet the needs of the household through work or genuine job search by able-bodied adult household members is required to qualify for MIS benefits. Extraordinary immediate assistance benefit can be up to the total costs incurred, with a ceiling of 10 times the adult personal needs allowance of CZK 48,600/€1,944 per year (from 1 January 2023). This discretionary irregular immediate assistance is intended to cover any urgent household needs that arise during the year and imply unexpected expenditure, including the purchase of durable goods and their repair. School-based expenditure represents only part of this. No information or studies are available on the purpose for which extraordinary immediate benefits are used, or on how effectively they cover the school-based costs for low-income children. What can be documented is that the number of all extraordinary benefits paid to households is relatively low: for example, while 61,500 households were recipients of regular MIS benefits, only 2,100 households were recipients of the extraordinary immediate assistance benefit in October 2022 (MLSA 2022d). In September 2022, when the school year started, it was a similar number (2,200 discretionary immediate assistance benefits were paid).²⁷ This small difference shows that aid for school-based costs does not appear to account for a large proportion of these benefits.

Hypothetically, most of the items mentioned in Tables 2.1a and 2.1b above may be covered, along with work clothing and work equipment for children in secondary vocational education. The same also applies to school winter and summer field trips, leisure activities and transport costs related to commuting to school.

As a result, children living in a household receiving social assistance benefits (under the MIS) can only receive irregular discretionary extraordinary assistance to cover the above-mentioned school-based costs.

2.3 Main barriers to effective and free access to school-based activities for low-income children

2.3.1 Financial barriers

There are no statistics or studies allowing an assessment of whether out-of-pocket fees for accessing school-based activities represent a financial barrier for low-income children. Only one study (Dvořáková *et al.* 2023) pays attention to the fact that, due to the effects of inflation, 9-12% of Czech households (17% among households with incomes below the median), reduced spending on their children's education between October 2022 and January 2023, and

²⁶ All eligibility thresholds for MIS benefits, household incomes considered for MIS benefits and the amount of the benefits are calculated in net amounts in accordance with legislation on the MIS.

²⁷ [736a7bc8-6077-3ede-de3b-be833a49bb6a \(mpsv.cz\)](https://mispv.cz/736a7bc8-6077-3ede-de3b-be833a49bb6a)

14-20% of households considered reducing this spending. Among the most frequently reduced areas of expenditure were purchases of books and ski and school trips.

What we can document is that – as explained below – means-tested discretionary support under the MIS does not appear to guarantee sufficient compensation for school costs for low-income children. This is mainly due to the discretionary principle applied. In consequence, it is uncertain whether children will be provided with this support. Another problem appears to be that the eligibility threshold for MIS extraordinary assistance is too low, being about one-third lower than the AROP threshold (see below), and thus not all AROP children may hypothetically be eligible for this discretionary irregular assistance.

According to the MLSA, as of January 2023, the minimum subsistence thresholds (per month) have been increased as follows: a single person CZK 4,860/€194, a second adult person in the family CZK 4,470/€179, a child under 6 CZK 2,480/€99, a child aged 6-15 CZK 3,050/€122, and a child aged 15-26 CZK 3,490/€140. This implies a threshold for a single-parent family with a child aged 0-6 of CZK 7,340/€294, and for a family with a couple and two children (aged 0-6 and 6-15) of CZK 14,860/€594. We also need to consider the second regular MIS benefit, which is a supplement to housing costs. According to MLSA data from October 2022 (MLSA 2022c), the average benefit amount was CZK 4,600/€184 per household (our own computations).²⁸ This implies a threshold of CZK 11,940/€478 for a 1+1 household (single parent with a child), and a threshold of CZK 19,460/€778 for a household of 2 adults+2 children (see above).

At the same time, according to EU-SILC data (CZSO 2022), the poverty threshold was CZK 168,655/€6,746 per year (i.e. CZK 14,055/€562 per month) in 2021. Using the equivalence scale for households of 1+1 and 2+2, this implies thresholds of CZK 18,271/€731 and CZK 29,515/€1,181, respectively.

The MIS threshold thus corresponds to 65.3% of the AROP level for 1+1 households and to 65.9% for 2+2 households.

This suggests that only a small proportion of AROPE children may be eligible for discretionary extraordinary social assistance. Information on the number of children receiving this assistance (for any reason) is not available. We can only attempt a rough estimate: in October 2022, about 65,000 households were receiving the basic MIS benefit (contribution towards living costs). We draw on a study by Horáková *et al.* (2013), which reported that the number of children among recipients of MIS benefits was 72% of the number of households receiving a contribution towards living costs in 2008 and 85% in 2011, when the number of households in receipt of the benefit nearly doubled due to the consequences of the 2008 financial crisis. The number of children in the 65,000 households receiving the MIS benefit in October 2022 could therefore be (roughly estimated at) around 55,000-56,000 (i.e. 78%). Taking into account the 271,000 children AROPE (0-18), the number of children who could potentially benefit from discretionary benefits aimed at covering school-related costs is about 19%.²⁹ No data are available to help assess the adequacy of the support provided.

2.3.2 Non-financial barriers

There are some non-financial barriers that low-income children face in accessing school-based activities. The main problem is that support for these activities is discretionary and is also linked to means-tested benefits under the MIS. The administrative procedures for claiming means-

²⁸ We are aware of the simplification when assuming an amount of the supplement to housing costs at the average level for different types of households.

²⁹ Data by Eurostat, EU-SILC Table People at risk of poverty or social exclusion by age and sex [ILC_PEPS01N__custom_4568269].

tested benefits under the MIS are quite challenging and complex (Sirovátka and Jahoda 2022). Potential recipients often lack reliable information and/or knowledge about their entitlements.³⁰ This may cause a significant rate of non-take-up.

The problem is further exacerbated by unfair practices observed in some labour offices responsible for benefit delivery, and criticised by the Office of the Public Defender of Rights (the Ombudsman) in 2019. As already explained, according to the legislation extraordinary social assistance can be used to cover school-based costs (including the cost of school clubs and school lunches) that families incur. The problem is that many parents, including single parents and low-income families, are not aware of this possibility. The Ombudsman said: *"I have come across cases where people have applied for extraordinary immediate assistance but have been persuaded by the office staff to withdraw their application on the grounds that they would not be granted the benefit anyway. The Labour Office cannot lawfully proceed in this way. Claimants should always insist that the office accept their application, assess it properly and issues a decision. The Labour Office must justify its conclusion and, in the case of a refusal, clearly describe and justify why it has not granted the benefit in that particular case"* (Ombudsman 2019).

3. Free meals at school

This section describes the situation regarding effective and free access for low-income children to at least one free healthy meal each school day.

3.1 Mapping free provision of school meals

Free school meals are not provided on a systematic basis in Czechia. All children get school meals at advantageous conditions. Parents pay the actual total costs of ingredients only, and the MEYS and the municipalities running the schools cover labour costs and overheads, which represent a major part of the meal costs (Sirovátka 2019).³¹

There are projects that support access to free school meals for low-income children. A *Lunches to Schools* initiative (referred to in Section 1.3) was started by the MLSA in co-operation with regional authorities and schools in 2015. It provides lunches to the poorest children aged 3-15 at school and pre-school facilities. For the period 2016-2020, CZK 400 million/€14.8 million was available from the FEAD, which was designed support children whose parents were long-term recipients of social assistance (for 20 months and more).

In the 2015/2016 school year, only 77 schools applied for the programme and 521 children received free lunches. In the 2020/2021 school year, the number of schools taking part in the project increased to 985, and 10,738 children received free lunches; in the 2021/2022 school year, a total of 1,240 schools participated, and 14,158 children had benefited from free lunches by October 2022. During 2022 the project budget was increased from the initial CZK 65 million/€2.6 million to CZK 137 million/€5.48 million (MLSA 2022d).

This increase was mainly motivated by a high number of refugee children from Ukraine in the country. According to our own calculations, the number of children provided with free lunches in 2020/2021 may have been around 25% of children eligible for MIS benefits and slightly above 5% of AROPE children (see Section 2 above for further figures on these categories).

³⁰ This is always the case with means-tested benefits, not to mention discretionary benefits.

³¹ Also: [Jídelny.cz - Informační portál hromadného stravování \(jidelny.cz\)](https://www.jidelny.cz) [Information portal for mass catering].

There are 4,238 primary schools and 5,349 kindergartens in Czechia (i.e. about 9,500 schools). Of these, 1,240 participate in the project, which is less than 15% of the total.

In addition, the MEYS operates a subsidy programme, Support for School Meals, which is open to applications from NGOs working with families in need of a subsidy to fully or partially cover the cost of school meals for low-income children. The project is supplementary to the MLSA project, as it does not restrict the target group to recipients of MIS benefits. It is mainly aimed at primary schools, but also at kindergartens in the two most disadvantaged regions in the country (Ústecký and Karlovarský) without age limit for children (Seifert *et al.* 2022). For example, in 2017 (only data for this year are available to the public), 6,701 children were supported (MEYS 2018). For 2022, the NGO Women for Women, which is the key partner for the MEYS in delivering school lunches, reported that 19,000 children were provided with school meals thanks to an increased amount made available for this purpose by the MEYS.³² This increase (when compared with 2017, see above) was probably mainly due to the inclusion of refugee children from Ukraine.

A survey conducted in 2021 in the two disadvantaged regions (35% of schools and kindergartens participated, N=252) shows that in these two regions about half of kindergartens, and close to 70% of primary schools, benefited for a longer period from the project (Seifert *et al.* 2022).

Prior to 2022, CZK 30 million/€1.2 million per year was available under the project. In 2022, the amount was doubled due to the inflow of children from Ukraine and for 2023 it was increased to CZK 100 million/€4 million (MEYS 2023).³³

As of February 2023, about 200,000 refugees from Ukraine are estimated to live in the country, and the number of children among them may be close to 70,000.³⁴ Together with the children coming from Ukraine during 2022-2023, the number of AROPE children is likely to increase. Information on these numbers is not available. We may assume that many Ukrainian children benefit from the support provided for school meals/lunches. Given the lack of available information, we estimate that 20,000 to 25,000 children, not including Ukrainian children, benefit from the above-mentioned projects of the MLSA and the MEYS, which provide free lunches at schools and kindergartens.

These initiatives/projects encouraged politicians to discuss a more systematic measure: in 2019, the parliament negotiated a proposal by the Social Democratic coalition party aimed at providing free school meals to all children in the last year of kindergarten and to children in the first five classes of primary education. The MEYS insisted that only children living in families that are entitled to child benefit should be eligible for free school meals³⁵ (Deník Dnes 2019). The government then discussed the possibility of providing free lunches to all children, but abandoned it due to disapproval by the ministries of finance and education, which were in the hands of the senior coalition partner, the ANO Movement. The ANO preferred to provide free lunches only to low-income children. Later, the government abandoned the plan to provide free lunches at schools altogether.

³² [Úvod - Obědy pro děti \(obedyprodeti.cz\)](#)

³³ Evidence on how many children were supported and how many of them came from Ukraine is not available. There is evidence that 360,000 Ukrainian refugees, of whom 130,000 were children, were granted asylum. However, many of them later returned to their homeland. Information provided in the Czech action plan for implementing the ECG from September 2022 confirms that 36% of Ukrainian refugees are children (MLSA 2022b).

³⁴ [Uprchlíci v datech: Podívejte se, kolik lidí našlo azyl ve vaší obci \[Refugees in figures: have a look at how many people have found asylum in your municipality\] - Seznam Zprávy \(seznamzpravy.cz\).](#)

³⁵ In Czechia, child benefits are income-tested: only children living in families whose income is below 3.4 times the subsistence minimum are entitled.

There is one additional initiative, *The Fruit, Vegetables and Milk to Schools* project, which is aimed at improving children's eating habits. Children learn to include fruit and vegetables in their diet. The project has been running in its current form since 2017, when two previously separate projects were merged and supported by the State Agricultural and Intervention Fund (SAIF) and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development.³⁶ Approximately two thirds of the programme's funding comes from national sources and the remainder from EU funds. Currently, almost 3,700 primary schools benefit from the supply of dairy products, and almost 4,000 from the supply of fruit and vegetables. A primary school enrolls in the programme by concluding a contract with one of the suppliers (applicants for subsidies) approved by the SAIF. The latter is then obliged to supply the approved products throughout the school year, ensuring the minimum number of deliveries announced at the beginning of the school year, currently two deliveries per month. The products are free for the schoolchildren. Additional educational measures such as food tasting or excursions are also a longstanding part of the project (SAIF 2022).

3.1.1 Conditions for qualifying as a “low-income child”

Not applicable.

3.1.2 Relation between the group(s) of children who have free access and the AROPE population of children in the relevant age group(s)

In Czechia, no children have free access to school meals on a systematic basis. There are projects that support a small proportion of the AROPE population of children.

3.2 Main barriers to effective and free access to school meals for low-income children

3.2.1 Financial barriers

There are no studies or data available on the financial barriers to effective and free access to school meals for low-income children.

If we look at these children's access to the *Lunches to Schools* project, which is targeted at children living in households receiving regular social assistance benefits under the MIS, what emerges as the key financial barrier is that the income threshold for eligibility is too low: children only qualify if the household income falls below the minimum subsistence level as stipulated in legislation (MLSA 2023a). As explained in the section above, this income threshold is about one third lower than the AROP threshold. This means that only children in “severe poverty” may be eligible for free lunches provided under the project.

Examples of the eligibility threshold for discretionary support for free school meals may include:

- a single parent with two children (one below 6, one 6-15): CZK 7,940/€305 monthly (supplement for housing costs and special-diet allowance are not included), net of taxes, and
- a couple with two children (one below 6, one 6-15): CZK 11,140/€428 monthly (supplement for housing costs and special-diet allowance are not included), net of taxes.

³⁶ [CmDocument \(szif.cz\)](#)

There are indications that the need for support is greater than the support provided: the highest number of children receiving free meals is seen in the Moravia-Silesia region. This is, of course, to be expected since it is one of the most populated regions, as well as one where unemployment rates, poverty rates and, consequently, the number of MIS recipients have been above the country's average for a long time (Sirovátka 2019).³⁷

3.2.2 Non-financial barriers

Age plays a role as an eligibility criterion, since free lunches are provided in primary schools and kindergartens to children aged 3-15 but not to children under 3 and over 15.³⁸ In addition, children are only eligible for free lunches in kindergartens and primary schools if the school/facility applies for and participates in the project or funding scheme (based on an application submitted by the school).

There is some evidence that the *Lunches to Schools* project has generated less interest than expected for the following reasons. There is a resistant attitude in some schools and regional governments towards this measure; and some officials think that poor nutrition among children is a problem of parenting, and that free meals provide an unfair advantage to some children. Other schools have concerns about the stigmatisation of children who should benefit from this targeted measure (Deník Dnes 2018). Next, there is a certain administrative burden for parents associated with the measure: parents have to bring a certificate from the labour office that they are MIS recipients. Finally, their children must not skip school, and have to eat the meal directly at school. Meals are not provided to children involved in the project during school holidays (Kalinová 2017).

The *Meals to Schools* project has also faced some implementation difficulties. Seifert *et al.* (2022) reported that, in the two most disadvantaged regions in Czechia, 62.5% of the directors of primary schools and kindergartens who participated in their survey (a sample of 35% of schools in the two regions) responded that, in the 2021/2022 school year, not all children in need of free lunches were provided for. The reported reasons included: administrative burdens; a lack of co-operation from families; and an incorrect definition of the target group. When asked why they had a problem participating in the project, respondents mostly answered that they did not know how to identify those who needed this kind of support. This obstacle should be eliminated by engaging with NGOs working with families in need.

4. Healthcare

This section describes the situation regarding effective and free access for low-income children to healthcare, focusing on vaccinations, care from a general practitioner (GP) or infant nurses, specialist care, dental care (not orthodontics) and prescribed medicines.

³⁷ It is a region affected by economic restructuring due to declining mining and heavy industries inherited from the socialist era.

³⁸ This will change since the new call No 26 of the MLSA from 28 March 2023 (Operational Programme Employment). *Potravinová pomoc dětem v sociální nouzi* includes children/pupils/students aged 2-26 living in households receiving MIS benefits, in foreclosure or assessed by a third party as in need of assistance; see [Výzva_026_OPZ+\(1\).pdf](#).

4.1 Mapping the provision of free healthcare services and products

Table 4.1: Healthcare costs (free for all/low-income children)

Vaccination	GP	Infant nurses	Specialist care	Dental care (not orthodontics)	Prescribed medicines
ALL	ALL	ALL	ALL	ALL	NO

Note: "ALL" means that all services/products in the category are free for all children. "NO" means that most/all services/products are not free for low-income children.

Czech legislation ensures equal and universal access to healthcare. Income does not play any role in the provision of free health services and products. Out-of-pocket payments consist mainly of direct payments for over-the-counter pharmaceuticals and some dental procedures, co-payments for medical supplies and prescription pharmaceuticals whose actual price exceeds the reference price in a particular pharmaceutical group; and user fees (flat rate of CZK 90/€3.60) for emergency care.

All compulsory vaccinations are fully covered from public health insurance (see Table 4.1). If parents request that their child be vaccinated with a vaccine other than the prescribed vaccine, only the administration of the vaccine, not the cost of the vaccine itself, is covered. The compulsory vaccinations are determined by Decree No 537/2006 Coll., on vaccination against infectious diseases. The vaccination programme starts with a compulsory and free hexavalent vaccine for all children, which protects them against diphtheria, tetanus, whooping cough, severe haemophilus infections, transmissible polio and infectious hepatitis B. Children are also vaccinated free of charge and compulsorily against measles, rubella and mumps (MeDitorial+ 2022).

The system of the Czech health professions does include specialist paediatric nurses. If the nurse is involved in preventive, dispensary, diagnostic, therapeutic, rehabilitative, or palliative care provided to children, those services are understood as provision of free health services (see Table 4.1).

All services and products in the categories "GP" and "specialist care" are free for all children (see Table 4.1).

Most dental care for children is free under the public health insurance system (see Table 4.1). Fissure sealing or photo-composite fillings for deciduous teeth are among the procedures that are not free in this category. However, reimbursement rules vary according to the materials used and age (some filling materials are reimbursed for children up to age 15 and other ones for older children).

The provision of prescribed medicines is commented on above.

4.1.1 Conditions for qualifying as a "low-income child"

Not applicable.

4.1.2 Relation between the group(s) of children who have free access and the AROPE population of children in the relevant age group(s)

Not applicable: access to all services is free for all children.³⁹ Regarding prescribed medicines: there are no groups of children who have free access.

4.2 Cash benefits whose specific purpose is to help meet healthcare costs

According to Eurostat (2022), Czechia was among the countries with the lowest proportion of people reporting unmet needs for healthcare-related services due to financial reasons in 2019.

However, research by the Office of the Government of Czechia (Baltag 2018) showed that barriers to real equality of access persisted in Czechia, one of the reasons being the “financial availability” of health services. The concept includes various types of costs and financial factors (e.g. the cost of medication and transport, or loss of income).

To reduce this barrier, a limit is set on the total expenditure on prescription medicines and food supplements per person per calendar year. If the limit is exceeded, the health insurance company refunds the money paid over the limit. This limit is five times lower for children under 18 than for adults of working age (CZK 1,000/€40 compared with CZK 5,000/€200). This applies to all children, irrespective of their income situation or of any other specific characteristics.

There are no studies that sufficiently address the adequacy and effectiveness of this benefit for low-income children. Some broader studies (Baltag 2018) and discussions on social media or in the media suggest that it may currently be challenging for low-income families to cover medication co-payments and bridge the time gap between spending and subsequent reimbursement from insurance. One possible solution that is being discussed in this context is to allow pharmacies not to charge co-payments to people who have already exceeded their medication limit.

4.3 Non-financial barriers to effective and free access to healthcare

Non-financial barriers hindering access to high-quality healthcare for low-income children coincide with existing general barriers to achieving real (not just legally declared) equity in access to health services. These include regional disparities in the capacity of health services that impair access to some specialist care, including paediatric care (EU 2018, Baltag 2018, or Malý 2018). Moreover, the increasing average age of doctors suggests that this problem will intensify in the future (Přádová 2022). In its action plan for the ECG (MLSA 2022b), the MLSA also mentions low health literacy, especially in or near socially excluded localities. The FRA study (2013) also identified cases of discrimination in access to health services based on ethnicity (Roma children).

The situation is particularly difficult in the field of child clinical psychology, where the need exceeds the capacity several times over (Němcová 2019, Synčák 2023).

Regarding paediatricians, a recently published analysis by Přádová (2022) mentioned the results of a study conducted in 2021 by a health insurance company, which mapped data on

³⁹ In Czechia, 13.3% of children were AROPE in 2021 (Eurostat, table ILC_PEPS01N).

commuting distances to doctors.⁴⁰ The situation was difficult in the South Moravia and Ústecký regions, but other regions⁴¹ were also facing issues. In the case of GPs for children, the relevant regulation sets a maximum commute time of 35 minutes, but the findings showed that some parents with children had to commute 5-10 minutes longer in these regions.

The average age of a GP for children and adolescents is around 60. The situation where a paediatrician retires and there is no one to take over their practice is increasingly common in Czechia. According to Přádová (*ibid.*), two trends are apparent when looking at the development of the age structure of paediatricians. While there is a generational turnover, with an increase in capacity in younger age categories, especially between 35 and 44, this increase is not significant enough to fully offset the retirement of large pre-retirement age groups. There has been an increase in the proportion of retirement-age physicians in total capacity.

5. Healthy nutrition

This section describes the situation regarding effective access by low-income children to healthy nutrition.

5.1 Main barriers to effective access to healthy nutrition

5.1.1 Financial barriers

As in Section 3, there are almost no studies reporting on financial barriers to effective access to healthy nutrition. Even the official action plan for implementing the ECG from September 2022 (MLSA 2022b) does not provide any specifics about financial barriers in its analytical section. The design section of this document includes a task "to analyse the area of lack of access to appropriate nutrition for children", with a target date of December 2024.

Some recent studies looking at barriers to healthy lifestyles, including healthy eating (e.g. Smejkalová and Fiala 2020, Fiala *et al.* 2021), have mentioned that households often cited financial reasons among the causes of poor eating habits in children.

Given the well known links between (on the one hand) unhealthy diets and obesity and its health consequences, and (on the other) social deprivation, poverty and social exclusion, it is generally believed that low incomes, including low social transfers, and the cost of healthy food are among the main financial barriers to accessing healthy nutrition by families. However, nothing specific can be said about the extent, structure and other details of these barriers.

EU-SILC data provided by Eurostat suggest a significant improvement in the proportion of households with dependent children that cannot afford a meal with meat, chicken or fish (or a vegetarian equivalent) every other day – the proportion fell from 12.9% to 3.5% between 2014 and 2020. When we look at AROP households with children, the improvement was considerable: the proportion fell from 35.8% (2014) to 18.5% (2020), which was below the 2020 EU-27 average of 20.5%.⁴²

⁴⁰ The availability of health services is determined by government regulations on the local and temporal availability of health services.

⁴¹ Pilsen, South Bohemia, Central Bohemia, and Vysočina regions.

⁴² EU-SILC, Table [ILC_MDES03__custom_5004299], downloaded on 17 January 2023.

5.1.2 Non-financial barriers

There are no empirical studies or data on the details of the barriers. The government's action plan apparently considers lack of family education and unhealthy eating habits to be barriers to access to healthy nutrition, as these are the ones targeted by the proposed measures (MLSA 2022b).

5.2 Publicly funded measures supporting access to healthy nutrition

Besides the main measure, which is the *Lunches to Schools* project described in Section 3, there are two additional publicly funded measures supporting access to healthy food for low-income children. None of these is aimed exclusively at low-income children. These are (1) the *Food and Material Deprivation of Homeless Persons and Households and Other Persons in Serious Social Need* Operational Programme, implemented through two follow-up projects under the responsibility of the MLSA (the programme is expected to be implemented by 30 June 2023), and (2) subsidies provided by various ministries to support the activities of non-governmental food banks.

The Operational Programme referred to is funded from the FEAD. The MLSA prepares and administers project applications and tenders for suppliers of individual items of food and material aid, through which food and other commodities are delivered to partner organisations. These partner organisations then carry out the distribution of the aid. The partners are mainly charitable, non-governmental, non-profit organisations that work with clients in material and social need, and assess the eligibility of their clients to receive assistance from the Operational Programme. They also identify what food and material aid their clients need. All food banks are involved in the distribution network as major logistics and distribution centres. In addition to the food and material aid purchased, the MLSA also provides lump-sum payments to the participating organisations to cover the costs of securing and distributing the aid. As of 2020, the MLSA had spent approximately CZK 390 million/€15.6 million through the programme (SAO 2021).

The MLSA has defined the following categories of eligible people:

- materially deprived families with children;
- homeless people;
- people at risk of losing their housing;
- single-parent families with low work intensity; and
- other people in serious social need.

The partner organisations that carry out the distribution of assistance select from among their clients those people who should be supported, and determine what kind and amount of assistance they should receive. In this context, the Supreme Audit Office's report states that there is no guaranteed uniform procedure for assessing eligibility for assistance or for determining the level of assistance (*ibid.*).

Food banks (as non-governmental, non-profit entities) receive subsidies from several subsidy programmes administered by the Ministry of Agriculture (MAG) and the Ministry of the Environment (MEn). The support provided by the MAG can be used for renting, renovating and building new warehouses, equipping them with refrigeration and freezing equipment, purchasing vehicles for food collection, for overhead costs such as utilities and the banks' operating costs, in particular to ensure the collection of food from supermarket chains and redistribute it to citizens in need. From 2016 to 2021, the ministry provided banks with a total of CZK 387 million/€15.5 million (MAG 2022).

Food banks are also supported by the MEn, which will pay them an additional CZK 200 million/€8 million for investments from European funds⁴³ in the year 2023 (*ibid.*).

6. Adequate housing

This section describes the situation regarding effective access for low-income children to adequate housing.

6.1 Publicly funded measures supporting access to adequate housing – housing allowances

Since 2007, the state has provided two housing benefits (MLSA 2023b). The first is the housing allowance (*Příspěvek na bydlení*) under the state social support system; and the second is the supplement for housing (*Doplatek na bydlení*) under the MIS. Both benefits are income-tested and are designed to assist low-income families to cover their housing-related expenditure. Eligibility for, and the amount of, the benefits is determined by the value of normative housing costs, which is set by the government on a yearly basis for various types of households (tenure, size of the household, size of municipality). Dependent children in the household and the number of children do not affect eligibility for housing benefits. However, the number of people in the household does determine eligibility and benefit levels. This ensures that benefit parameters are able to account for the higher housing costs commonly faced by families with children.

The state provides the housing allowance to permanent residents of properties, regardless of whether they own or rent the property. Eligibility for the allowance is based on whether 30% of the family (household) reference income (net labour income and selected social benefits) is insufficient to cover justified housing costs (the actual housing costs up to the limit of the normative housing costs set by law). The allowance amount is determined by calculating the difference between the justified housing costs and the family's reference income multiplied by a coefficient of 30%. The coefficient was increased to 35% for Prague until the end of 2022. Approximately 228,000 benefit payments were made in December 2022, which represented a coverage of approximately 5% of Czech households (MLSA 2023c). The number of benefit recipients increased by exactly 50% year-on-year, with the increase occurring mainly from Q3/2022 onwards due to high energy prices and benefit adjustments made from October 2022.

The supplement for housing tackles those cases where a family's reference income (net labour income and selected social benefits including the housing allowance) is insufficient to cover the justified housing costs. The benefit is calculated in such a manner as to cover the gap between the payment of justified housing costs and the basic amount required for living. Justified housing costs include rent, housing-related services and energy bills. Approximately 36,000 benefit payments were made in December 2022, which corresponds to less than 1% of Czech households.

The idea behind the supplement for housing is that every household should be guaranteed the living minimum after housing costs. There is, however, a ceiling on the supplement to housing costs, corresponding to the normative costs appropriate to the locality. This means that the supplement for housing is differentiated according to the actual regional/local housing costs.

⁴³ The second call in the expiring programming period of the Operational Programme Environment 2014-2020.

Up to 24% of Czech households were eligible in 2022 for a housing allowance, according to research conducted by Czech Radio and PAQ Research (Czech Radio 2022). However, on average, only 4% of households actually received the benefit (approximately 5% in 2023), indicating that many eligible individuals were not taking advantage of it. The authors of the study attributed this to the potential applicants' assumption that they did not meet the eligibility criteria, and to older people's hesitation about applying due to the complexity of the paperwork involved. Working-age individuals may also avoid applying due to feelings of embarrassment or shame. The issue of low uptake has gained more attention in 2022 and 2023 as energy prices have risen. There is no study available to show that the problem of non-take-up affects more low-income households with children. On the contrary, we believe that the non-take-up issue does not affect them as much. We are led to this conclusion by the fact that these households are more likely to be recipients of means-tested social benefits, where there is a greater connection between individual benefits (one benefit triggers eligibility for another) and where these benefits are often processed simultaneously.

The benefits may be granted even to tenants in private rented accommodation in hostels/shelters (which not infrequently are of sub-standard quality), up to the level of the justified housing costs (capped at 80% of the normative housing costs in this specific case). The reason is that sometimes no other housing options are available (e.g. municipal housing). Labour offices provide housing allowance to individuals with low incomes. However, some property-owners may charge high rents for sub-standard housing conditions, which contributes to the high housing cost in the absence of rent regulation (e.g. Balvín 2021 or CT 2017). While this may be considered unfair, it is important to remember that labour offices exist primarily to assist people in need, not to regulate the housing market.

Both housing benefits are managed by the local labour office and require similar documentation from households. However, the supplement for housing has a stricter means test, while also allowing for higher benefits if the household faces housing costs that exceed the normative housing costs. Conversely, a lower amount of the benefit may also be awarded. The supplement for housing is designed to provide at least a minimum income to the poorest households, while housing allowance is more broadly aimed at helping low-income households with high housing costs. Previously, local authorities had discretion to withhold the new supplement for housing benefits from certain localities to prevent over-concentration of poor households. However, this measure was sometimes interpreted too broadly by some municipalities, resulting in the denial of benefits throughout the entire municipality (Malecký 2020). This practice was particularly insensitive to households living in excluded localities. After facing considerable criticism from non-profit organisations working with poor people – see their joint appeal to the government (SPOT 2020) – the measure was repealed (Constitutional Court 2021). The removal of the discretionary power to withhold the new supplement for housing benefits from certain localities (housing-supplement-free zones) immediately provoked very strong and divergent reactions from representatives of the affected cities and representatives of the non-governmental sector (Czech Radio 2021, Eliáš 2021, Orlová, 2021). Representatives of organisations working with clients from socially excluded localities welcomed the decision. On the other hand, representatives of the cities strongly criticised the decision and pointed to the benefits that the repealed measure had brought. One year on, city representatives generally admitted that the measure had not significantly worsened the situation in the affected localities (CTK 2022). This was partly due to more targeted social work with clients from excluded localities and partly due to measures aimed at improving housing policy in the cities concerned.

As previously noted, the main objective of the supplement for housing is to ensure that the housing costs of poor households are adequately covered. The relatively low number of supplement for housing beneficiaries is due to a greater capacity of the housing allowance to

assist households with lower incomes and higher housing costs. In the autumn of 2022, the Research Institute for Labour and Social Affairs (RILSA) conducted a novel analysis⁴⁴ of Q2/2022 housing allowance recipient data for the MLSA. This analysis, the first of its kind in the country, provided the basis for a subsequent legislative amendment adopted in 2023.

The law's explanatory memorandum explains that (Parliament 2022, p. 7): *“Based on the available data, it is clear that the current categorisation based on household size and municipality/town size does not accurately reflect the varying levels of housing costs experienced by different household types across localities of varying sizes”*. It also says that (ibid., p. 11): *“the data show that the normative housing costs ‘cap’ the actual housing costs for about 36% of benefit recipients. This is disproportionately the case for one- and two-person households (43%), less so for three-person households (24%), and significantly below average for households of four or more people (16%)”*. The report concludes (ibid., p. 12): *“Based on the survey, the housing costs of economically active individuals are nearly as high as those of single mothers with one child, and even higher than those of two pensioners living in the same household”*. The analysis also demonstrated that two-parent households with children were better protected than single-parent households, even prior to the amendment. The amended law has increased the normative costs, leading to a significant reduction in the extent to which actual costs are capped by normative costs. The research project *Czech Republic 2022 – Život k nezaplacení (Life is Priceless)* confirmed that one-person households bore the highest burden of housing costs, particularly given the increase in costs in 2022.

6.2 Publicly funded measures supporting access to adequate housing – social housing

6.2.1 Mapping the provision of social housing

We do not have any data or studies that look closely at the situation of families with children (or low-income families with children) and their access to social housing. This is largely due to the fact that Czechia does not have a systematic approach to social housing. Instead, we present below a study on the rules for the provision of municipal housing, from which we select those parts that deal with families with children.

In the absence of a national law governing social housing,⁴⁵ decisions about establishing a social housing system and what form it should take remain the responsibility of individual municipalities (MLSA 2023d).

To obtain information on whether a municipality provides social housing, individuals can contact the social or housing department of the municipality, a municipal social worker, or a non-profit organisation that works with individuals in need of housing. Since there is no legal definition of social housing, statistics on the number of municipalities providing social housing do not exist. However, it can be noted that the majority of large municipalities allocate part of their housing stock to address the social needs of their residents.

The issue of municipal housing has been systematically addressed by the Ombudsman. In 2019, the Ombudsman conducted an extensive investigation (Ombudsman 2020) by requesting 501 municipalities to complete a questionnaire and provide their policies for the

⁴⁴ Due to the nature of the data (data from the registers of housing allowance recipients) and the agreement between the RILSA and the MLSA (the contracting authority), the analysis has not been published. However, parts of it appeared in the explanatory memorandum to the benefit amendment act (Parliament 2022, p. 13).

⁴⁵ Despite several prior attempts, Czechia has yet to pass a relevant law that would set out the rights and obligations of citizens and municipalities with respect to social housing. Currently, the social housing issue falls within the purview of both the Ministry of Regional Development – responsible for housing policy, and the MLSA – the guarantor and supervisor of social work.

allocation of municipal housing. The sample of respondents comprised all 414 municipalities with at least 5,000 inhabitants, and 87 smaller municipalities selected by quota.

Of the 501 municipalities that were contacted, 79% (395) responded to the questionnaire. Out of these, 80% had municipal flats, while the remaining 16% did not. The survey revealed that, on average, 17 people applied for each available municipal apartment, indicating a high demand for municipal housing. This puts pressure on municipalities to have allocation rules in place. However, as the Ombudsman noted, it also allows for a great deal of discretion in the rules, which may not always be consistent with the needs of low-income households.

The Ombudsman obtained housing allocation rules from 241 municipalities (research performed in 2019), with some municipalities not having a single policy but several, based on the category of flats. Whereas 43% of municipalities reported not taking into account the applicants' situation or favouring any specific group, the remaining municipalities tended to favour older people (34%), single parents (31%), people in social distress (31%), families with minor children (29%), and people with disabilities (28%). Preferences for care-givers (8%), children leaving institutional care (8%), and people leaving healthcare were less frequent. Some municipalities noted their co-operation with the social welfare department in the selection process.

Approximately 25% of the policy documents reviewed, for both municipal and social housing, rated the presence of minor children in the applicant's family positively, but the score was typically capped, meaning that the score did not increase in direct proportion to the number of children (Ombudsman 2020, p.89). Although the Ombudsman expected household net income to be the primary criterion considered by municipalities, only 2% of the policy documents stated a minimum income, while 6% of the documents stated a maximum income, especially for applicants for social housing. However, the source of income was a significant consideration for municipalities, with gainful employment being the most frequently mentioned criterion in 30% of the documents. As numerous studies have pointed out (e.g. Kajanová 2015, p. 66, or Borusík 2021), families of Roma origin may be more dependent on social benefits, and less dependent on income from economic activity, than families from the majority background. However, if a household does not have income from economic activity, the above-described condition may constitute a barrier to access to municipal social housing. This was confirmed in 2021 by the government's *Strategy for Roma Equality, Inclusion and Participation 2021-2030* (Government 2021, p. 63).

6.2.2 Main barriers to effective access to social housing

6.2.2.1 Financial barriers

As previously explained, the system of two housing benefits provides assistance to low-income households to help cover their housing costs. However, it is worth noting that the system only covers housing costs that do not exceed the customary costs in the locality. The studies cited above suggest that, with respect to housing costs, the problem for low-income households is more likely to be low housing quality or hidden discriminatory practices by both private and public housing providers. In the absence of a systematic approach to social housing, low-income households are exposed to high housing costs at market rates. Since these are covered by public budgets, the system does not create incentives to reduce them, but rather the opposite. According to Eurostat, 40% of income-poor households with children in Czechia (earning below 60% of median equivalised income) spend more than 40% of their income on housing costs, making Czechia one of the countries with the highest rate of housing cost overburden for these households. For households with children that are not income-poor, the

proportion of those who spend more than 40% of their income on housing is much lower, at 1.9%.⁴⁶

As previously mentioned, social housing policies differ among municipalities, with some allocating part of their housing stock to address the social needs of their citizens, with priority given to specific social groups. About a third of municipalities give some priority to families with children, especially single-parent families. However, it cannot be said that low-income households with children have fundamentally better access to municipal housing stock than other groups in need. For instance, Prague (2023) describes a unique programme aimed at households with older members, members with disabilities or those in certain professions, such as selected public sector employees. Although municipalities may offer rent reductions for low-income households, these may not be necessary given the comprehensive coverage of housing costs provided by housing benefits.

6.2.2.2 Non-financial barriers

Any citizen can apply for a council flat. As previously mentioned, municipalities typically have specific eligibility requirements that must be met in order to receive a contract for a flat, and these requirements are publicly announced. In some cases, priority may be given to citizens in difficult social situations, but many municipalities still require applicants to have a source of income and no outstanding debt owed to the city in order to be considered for a municipal flat.

No study is currently available that specifically deals with the non-financial barriers to housing availability faced by low-income households with children. The available studies we have cited mention this group only indirectly. In some of the cases mentioned, it is clear that the barriers identified may have a greater impact on low-income families with children than on other types of households. According to the Ombudsman (2020, p. 85), some municipalities use criteria in their allocation rules for municipal housing that may violate the right to equal treatment. These criteria may disadvantage individuals receiving parental or maternity allowance and people with disabilities, and disproportionately benefit people with income from economic activity. The Ministry of the Interior also considers another group of criteria unlawful (Ombudsman 2020, p. 41), such as excluding applicants who receive social benefits or requiring a certain length of residency in the municipality. Finally, a third group of problematic criteria, which NGOs working with clients in housing need consider the biggest obstacle to access to municipal housing, includes requirements for various certificates (excluding or disadvantaging applicants with debts), and the requirement to renew the application for municipal housing annually.

Based on its audits of municipalities, the Supreme Audit Office (2018) has highlighted some non-financial factors that hinder better provision of social housing. These include poor co-ordination of support from the state to municipalities, inadequate evaluation, higher administrative costs of providing support, and the lack of a legal framework for social housing. In general, these are factors that do not concern specific beneficiaries of support, but rather indicate dysfunctional areas of the social housing system as a whole.

⁴⁶ Eurostat: Housing cost overburden rate by age, sex and poverty status – EU-SILC survey [ILC_LVHO07A__custom_4762744], downloaded on 1 February 2023.

6.3 Publicly funded measures supporting access to adequate housing – other measures

Besides housing allowances and social housing, there are no other measures that support access to adequate housing for low-income households with children.

The Ministry of Regional Development is drafting a new law on housing support. It is supposed to change housing affordability and make the granting of assistance to those in housing need more efficient. In March 2023, the minister stated (Bartoš 2023) that officials were nearing completion of the draft law: however, it is currently not publicly available. According to the minister, contact points should be established in municipalities with extended jurisdiction to advise people on how to deal with their housing situation. The law should also provide for a system of guarantees to motivate owners of empty flats to rent them out.

In early April 2023, the government announced (CT 2023) that it would invest heavily in supporting the creation of new rental housing over the next few years. In addition to municipalities, private entities could also be beneficiaries of the new programme if they commit to allocating part of the resulting housing stock to social housing needs. The rent in these apartments would then be cheaper than the market rent, and the municipality would have the power to determine the target groups of households (e.g. socially vulnerable families or teacher couples with children).

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Annex

Table A.1: How children's groups replace lost places in kindergartens

	Children under 3 in kindergartens			Children in children's groups
			Difference (decline in the number of children in 2021/2022)	
Prague	3,684	3,256	428	3,456
Central Bohemia	4,671	3,689	982	3,555
South Bohemia	3,292	2,540	752	1,043
Plzensky	1,882	1,354	528	803
Karlovarsky	1,337	978	359	203
Ustecky	3,489	2,330	1,159	1,322
Liberecky	1,699	1,328	371	670
Kralovehradecky	2,836	1,807	1,029	905
Pardubicky	2,774	1,754	1,020	914
Highlands	2,489	1,854	635	429
South Moravia	4,659	3,121	1,538	3,228
Olomoucky	3,503	2,504	999	1,147
Zlinsky	2,715	2,001	714	737
Moravia-Silesia	5,665	4,203	1,462	1,770
Czechia	44,729	32,714	12,015	19,973

Source: Our own calculations based on MEYS data *Statistická ročenka školství – Výkonové ukazatele, MŠMT ČR (msmt.cz)* [Statistical Yearbook of Education 2021/2022 – performance indicators].

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